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THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURE IN STUDENT EXCHANGE

– Case: H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis, first cohort



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The challenge of culture in student exchange – Case: H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis, first cohort

During the past two decades, internationalization has been a strong and growing trend in European higher education institutions, largely due to the Bologna Process, signed in 1999. This has led to many institutions developing joint- and double degrees with motives ranging from broadening educational offerings to raising international visibility and prestige.

This thesis is a case study, the purpose of which is to provide a general overview of the structure of the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis double degree program as well as the challenges faced by the first cohort of students participating from Turku University of Applied Sciences. Interviews were chosen as the research method and in order to form a basic knowledge of the program itself, the official Memorandum of Understanding, signed by the three participating institutions, as well as the E.U. progress report were used.

Because culture is an integral part of studying abroad and may create significant challenges to all parties involved, the theoretic framework of this thesis discusses the different cultures involved in the program. The main aspects of American and Scottish culture which were examined included religion, food customs and education. These were also compared to the same aspects of Finnish culture.

Two participants of the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis double degree program were interviewed in order to assess the success of the program during its pilot year. Although the students reported many problems with the execution of the program, they were generally satisfied with the experience. The main benefits they saw in the program were personal growth and a sense of accomplishment.

By comparing the original goals of the program with execution, it is evident that many problems arose, all of which could not be solved in a way favorable to the students. Although the students have yet to experience any benefits of having a double degree, they are hopeful that their efforts will benefit them in the future.

KEYWORDS:

Studying abroad, student exchange, double degree, interview study

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Kulttuurit opiskelijavaihdon haasteena – Case: H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis, ensimmäinen opiskelijaryhmä

Kahden viime vuosikymmenen aikana kansainvälistyminen on ollut vuonna 1999 allekirjoitetun Bolognan julistuksen johdosta vahvassa kasvussa Eurooppalaisissa korkeakouluissa. Tämä on johtanut monissa korkeakouluissa erilaisten yhteis- ja kaksoistutkintojen kehittämiseen. Motiiveina ovat toimineet monet eri syyt koulutustarjonnan laajentamisesta kansainvälisen tunnettuuden lisäämiseen.

Tämä opinnäytetyö on case study, jonka tavoitteena on tarjota yhteenveto H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis kaksoistutkinto-ohjelmasta sekä tutustuttaa lukija niihin haasteisiin, joita ensimmäinen Turun ammattikorkeakoulusta lähetetty ryhmä opintojensa ohessa kohtasi. Tutkimusmenetelmäksi valikoitui haastattelu ja itse ohjelmaan liittyvän tietoperustan rakentamista varten käytettiin yhteistyö korkeakoulujen allekirjoittamaa dokumenttia, Memorandum of Understanding, sekä Euroopan Unioniin lähetettyä väliaikaraporttia.

Koska kulttuuri on erittäin tiivis osa vaihto-opiskelua ja voi aiheuttaa melkoisia haasteita kaikille osapuolille, tämän opinnäytetyön teoreettinen viitekehys tutkii ohjelmassa osallisena olevia kulttuureita. Uskonto, ruokakulttuuri sekä opiskelu otettiin amerikkalaisen sekä skotlantilaisen kulttuurin osalta tarkemman tarkastelun kohteeksi. Näitä myös verrattiin samoihin aihepiireihin suomalaisessa kulttuurissa.

Kahta Turun ammattikorkeakoulussa H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis -kaksoistutkintoa suorittavaa opiskelijaa haastateltiin jotta voitiin arvioida ohjelman tavoitteiden toteutumista ensimmäisen opiskelijaryhmän kohdalla. Vaikka opiskelijat kertoivat monista epäkohdista ohjelmassa, olivat he pääosin tyytyväisiä kokemukseensa. Suurimmiksi hyödyiksi ohjelmassa he kokivat henkilökohtaisen kasvun sekä yleisen saavutuksen tunteen.

Vertaamalla projektin alkuperäisiä tavoitteita toteutukseen, paljastui ohjelmasta monia epäkohtia, joista kaikkia ei voitu ratkaista opiskelijoiden kannalta suotuisasti. Vaikka osallistujat eivät ole vielä havainneet konkreettisia hyötyjä kaksoistutkinnon suorittajina, ovat he toiveikkaita tulevaisuuden suhteen.

ASIASANAT:

Opiskelu ulkomailla, opiskelijavaihto, kaksoistutkinto, haastattelututkimus

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1 INTRODUCTION

Many students in universities today take part in some type of international studies in order to get a broader educational experience. During the past two decades, internationalization has indeed been a strong and growing trend in European universities largely due to the Bologna Process. According to the official Bologna Process website: “The overarching aim of the Bologna Process is to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on international cooperation and academic exchange that is attractive to European students and staff as well as to students and staff from other parts of the world” (Benelux Bologna Secretariat 2007-2010). In other words, the goal of the EHEA was to ensure that international degrees achieved in the cooperating institutions would be recognized world-wide so that graduates would have increased mobility not only during their studies, but after graduation as well. The Bologna declaration was originally signed in Bologna on June nineteenth 1999 by ministers in charge of higher education from 29 countries in Europe. In 2010, forty-nine countries were members of the Bologna Process. As a result of the Bologna process and the EHEA, increasing numbers of joint- and double degree programs have become available within European universities as well as globally. (Benelux Bologna Secretariat 2007-2010.)

1.1 Double degrees today

According to the Finnish Ministry of Education, two types of international degree programs are currently typical in higher education; joint degrees and double degrees. Joint degrees are developed and organized by two or several higher education institutions in collaboration which leads to one joint degree certificate. In contrast, double degrees refer to degree programs developed and organized by two or more higher education institutions in collaboration which leads to two or more degree certificates, typically one from each of the partnering institutions. (Ministry of Education 2004.)

As stated in a report by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the Freie Universität Berlin which surveyed the scope of joint and double degrees in 2011, double degrees are more common than joint degrees. The main motives for developing double

degrees, as indicated by the 245 higher education institutions from 28 different countries which were surveyed in the study, were “broadening educational offerings, strengthening research collaboration, advancing internationalization, and raising international visibility/prestige”. (Obst et al. 2011, 7.)

1.2 Goals and limitations of this thesis

This thesis is a case study, the purpose of which is to provide the reader with a general understanding of the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis program as well as survey the experiences of the first cohort of students from Turku University of Applied Sciences participating in it. More specifically, the goals of the students as well as the program administrators will be mapped out and the success of achieving these will be evaluated. Throughout the evaluation carried out in this thesis, the main focus will be the Finnish students’ point of view, as it was their studies which had to be most modified in order to fit the double degree, mostly due to the fact that the Finnish degree is normally three and a half years in duration while both the Scottish and U.S. degrees normally take four years. The official Memorandum of Agreement and the first E.U. progress report were used as a basis for information regarding program details.

The interest for exploring the subject of international studies and more specifically, double degrees came from the author’s own participation in the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis double degree program. The main question to be answered in this thesis is whether the students of the first cohort felt that the program helped them meet their goals regarding the internationalization of their degrees. Although the research only includes interviews from two students, the findings are valuable to those developing similar programs, as these two students participated in the pilot year of the program. Because culture is an integral part of studying abroad and may create significant challenges to all parties involved, the theoretic framework of this thesis discusses the different cultures involved in the program.

1.3 Methodology

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the success of the first cohort of students in the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis double degree program, the interview was chosen as the method for gathering information. As Gillham (2005, 3-4) states: "The relationship between interviewer and interviewee is responsive or interactive, allowing for a degree of 'adjustment': clarification, exploration, for example: *Tell me more about that or I don't think I quite understand.*" Because the program has been a very personal experience for those taking part in it, the interview would allow answers to expand freely and this, in turn, might reveal points that the interviewer had not thought of.

The interviews were conducted as distance interviews, as challenges due to time and location were present. In fact, time and location proved so challenging, that one of the students was not reached for interviewing at all. From the remaining two students, one was interviewed using Skype and the other by email. Although Gillham (2005, 5) suggests that distance-interviews are slightly frowned upon in the research field, in this case, as there were only two interviewees and they were personal acquaintances of the interviewer, interviews by email and Skype were evaluated as appropriate. Finally, because this is a qualitative study, and much of the success of the program itself depends on the personal experience of the participants, the subjective nature of data gathered from interviews (Gillham 2005, 6) was not seen as a problem.

The questions were constructed in a way that minimized "yes" or "no" answers and instead encouraged the respondent to elaborate on their experiences. An interview structure similar to the semi-structured interview described by Gillham (2005, 70) was used. More specifically, questions were left open, asking *how* something was achieved rather than *was* it achieved. In case the answers appeared too narrow, additional questions would be asked to prompt the student to elaborate on the subject.

The questions were grouped into those which addressed the students' own goals and their achievement; and those that questioned the success of the program goals. The first question asked the students to list their original goals when entering the program, after which the next questions asked them to assess how well these goals were

reached. To broaden the results, the students were also asked to share the successes as well as failures that they encountered while participating in the program. In addition, the respondents were asked to comment on the general benefits to their career that they believed having a dual degree would bring.

The final questions focused on some of the goals set forth by the partnering institutions and asked the students to evaluate how well those goals were achieved. From the full list of goals set forth by the partnering institutions in the Memorandum of Understanding (Oklahoma State University, Robert Gordon University and Turku University of Applied Sciences 2009), those directly affecting the students' learning experience were focused on. Finally, the last questions extended the opportunity to make suggestions for improvement based on the experiences gained during the program.

1.4 The Memorandum of Understanding and the Progress Report

The *Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU) (Oklahoma State University, Robert Gordon University and Turku University of Applied Sciences 2009) signed by the three partnering institutions, Oklahoma State University, Robert Gordon University and Turku University of Applied Sciences, was created to establish a set of common goals between the universities for the program titled the *H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis Program – Higher Opportunities for Training, Education and Languages*. The main purpose of the MOU itself was to “record the understanding and commitment of the three parties to promote and strengthen a culture and language intensive double-degree transatlantic undergraduate program in hotel management”. During the project, a total of 24 students were to study in three different universities and receive undergraduate degrees from two of those three. According to the MOU (Oklahoma State University, Robert Gordon University and Turku University of Applied Sciences 2009), the goals of the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis dual degree program regarding the learning experience of the individual students can be grouped into three main objectives as found below. The MOU has been utilized in this thesis as a basis for the goals of the program itself.

The EU progress report shows the progression of the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis Program during the first two years of operation. The adaptation of the some of the original goals

stated in the MOU can be tracked through the document. A record of challenges faced during the first two years as well as some of the solutions is recorded in the report. For the purposes of this thesis, some comparison between the MOU and the first Progress Report has been made in order to track the modification of the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis Program.

1.4.1 Language

Firstly, the program was aimed to provide all applicants with fluent skills in English as well as a “basic knowledge of Spanish and Finnish”. This would entail Oklahoma State University providing the opportunity for students to increase proficiency in English as well as a basic knowledge of Spanish. In addition opportunities to study German and French, based on prior experience, were also to be provided. As stated in the progress report (2011, 21), “In order to reinforce the languages, all students will participate in language courses, workshops and seminars.” During the studies of the first cohort, however, no opportunities to study languages other than English and Finnish were presented.

1.4.2 Cultural understanding

Secondly, the students were to be provided with a thorough understanding of the influence of culture on management, business and strategy. To strengthen the cultural experience, the partner institutions would offer three seminar courses as well as opportunities for the students to experience everyday life by staying with a host family. A part of this objective was also to assist in the arrangements for an internship. The seminars originally planned did not take place during the mobility period of the first cohort, although teacher mobility did provide some extra lectures by visiting professors.

1.4.3 Mobility and transparency

The third objective of the program was to promote mobility and transparency between Universities in Europe and the United States. Because the degree programs in each country differ in their structure, the universities agreed to “work in good faith to find crea-

tive solutions for any administrative, structural, procedural and resources related issues that might occur". Some of these differences include the length as well as the focus of the programs.

As stated in the EU progress report (2011, 17), the main concern between the different degree programs was the General Education requirements of Oklahoma State University which were not required at European universities. Although the requirements could not be voided due to Oklahoma state legislation, the program administrators came up with solutions that enabled the students to fulfill the General Education requirements while still learning about the hotel and restaurant industry.

2 THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURE IN STUDENT EXCHANGE

According to Oxford dictionaries, culture is defined as “the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society” (Oxford Dictionaries 2012). Therefore, it is natural that the culture surrounding a student will have impact on the studies themselves. In their study, Sulkowski and Deakin (2009, 154-155) summarized the possible obstacles a student may face due to cultural differences as language issues; what the students feel is appropriate interaction between students and teachers as well as among peers; and finally, problems in matching teaching and learning styles as well as assessment methods. Understanding these challenges is imperative, as failing to do so may lead to misconception about students’ motivation, participation or understanding (Sulkowski and Deakin 2009, 155). A student who is quiet in class may indeed have trouble understanding the language of instruction, but he or she may also be used to that type of conduct in class.

The next sections discuss the cultures of Scotland and the United States and their effects on a student’s experience in a university. In addition, some comparison to Finnish culture will be made in order to highlight to challenges that the students from TUAS faced during the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis program. For the purposes of this thesis, the following sections will focus on the few aspects of culture which the author perceived as most closely influencing the experience of an exchange student.

2.1 American culture

The culture of the United States may be characterized by concepts such as diversity, high-consumerism and individualism. Life in America is very fast-paced, as everyone wants to get everywhere first. According to Richard Lewis (2005, 179), the pace of life is a remnant from colonial times, when setting up a life in America closely followed the theory of “first-come, first-served”. In his book, Lewis (2005, 179) summarizes the modern situation: “America is first in volume of trade, first in industry, first in food output and first in aid to others. They spend, too, being the top consumers of energy, oil, oil seeds, grain, rubber, copper, lead, zinc, aluminum, tin, coffee and cocoa.” In addition,

Americans own more cars, technology such as refrigerators, cellular phones and VCR's, and have among the highest rates of divorce and murder in the world.

2.1.1 Religion

While studying in the United States, a student will run into enormous diversity when it comes to religion. In fact, as stated by MacQueen: "Religious freedom is one of the most cherished and religiously guarded pillars of the American republic." (2009, 121). Religious freedom can be easily perceived in everyday life merely by making a note of all the different places of worship available. The table in picture 1 shows the representation of major religions in the United States.

Major Religious Traditions in the U.S.	
Among all adults...	
	%
Christian	78.4
Protestant	51.3
<i>Evangelical churches</i>	26.3
<i>Mainline churches</i>	18.1
<i>Hist. black churches</i>	6.9
Catholic	23.9
Mormon	1.7
Jehovah's Witness	0.7
Orthodox	0.6
<i>Greek Orthodox</i>	<0.3
<i>Russian Orthodox</i>	<0.3
<i>Other</i>	<0.3
Other Christian	0.3
Other Religions	4.7
Jewish	1.7
<i>Reform</i>	0.7
<i>Conservative</i>	0.5
<i>Orthodox</i>	<0.3
<i>Other</i>	0.3
Buddhist	0.7
<i>Zen Buddhist</i>	<0.3
<i>Theravada Buddhist</i>	<0.3
<i>Tibetan Buddhist</i>	<0.3
<i>Other</i>	0.3
Muslim*	0.6
<i>Sunni</i>	0.3
<i>Shia</i>	<0.3
<i>Other</i>	<0.3
Hindu	0.4
Other world rel.	<0.3
Other faiths	1.2
<i>Unitarians and other liberal faiths</i>	0.7
<i>New Age</i>	0.4
<i>Native American rel.</i>	<0.3
Unaffiliated	16.1
Atheist	1.6
Agnostic	2.4
Nothing in particular	12.1
<i>Secular unaffiliated</i>	6.3
<i>Religious unaffiliated</i>	5.8
Don't Know/Refused	0.8
	100

Due to rounding, figures may not add to 100 and nested figures may not add to the subtotal indicated.

* From "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," Pew Research Center, 2007

Picture 1 – Major religions in the U.S. (PEW research center 2002)

The role that religion plays in the lives of American citizens and among them, students, is quite unlike anything that can be experienced in most other developed countries. According to findings in the Pew Global Attitudes Project (PEW research center 2002), Americans indeed embrace their religion more fully than the citizens of any other wealthy nation. The importance of religion can be easily perceived in every-day life, even at universities.

According to MacQueen (2009, 124), in addition to its religious function, the church also has a significant social function, in which both active members as well as those outside church membership are welcomed into activities organized by the church. Volunteerism is an important aspect of everyday life in the United States and the church community plays a big part in it. In fact, according to the author's experiences, religion is indeed tightly knit into the daily lives of many Americans which, as an exchange student, may be observed in the number of student bible study groups as well as students taking part in church activities such as volunteering.

2.1.1 Food culture

In general, American dining customs consist of three main meals daily, which are breakfast lunch and dinner, with dinner being the heaviest of the three (U.S. Coast Guard 2002). Due to the fast-paced style of life as well as the importance of individualism discussed at the beginning of this section, convenience and diversity are key in food habits in the United States. Grocery stores are packed with ethnic foods, such as Asian, Indian and Mediterranean; convenience foods, such as canned-, frozen- and microwaveable meals; and even most small towns will have restaurants representing at least a few different cultures.

According to a report by the United States Department of Agriculture (2003, 15-16), American diets are characterized by high intake of meat, cheese and salty snack foods as well as sodas, ades (such as lemonade) and flavored teas. In addition, eating at restaurants is much more common than cooking one's meals at home. Because American freshman students at college are often experiencing looking after themselves for the first time, it is common for them to prefer easy dining options which may be high in fat

and sugar content (Lowe et al. 2006, 84). Therefore, it is common for both domestic and foreign students to gain weight, especially in the first year of their studies.

2.1.2 Studying at college

A college education in the United States is sought after for both private and social benefits. Private reasons, according to Steinberg et al. (2009, 236) include access to higher salaries, better consumer choices as well as better health, while social benefits consist of higher involvement within the community, lower unemployment and crime, and increased charitable contributions of time as well as money. In the United States, education is paid for by the student or, as in many cases, his or her family (MacQueen, 2009, 226). Although some grants and government assistance programs, such as the Pell grant, are available, the practice of self-financed higher education leads to an imbalance of representation from different social classes, students from lower income families being the least visible group in universities (Steinberg et al. 2009, 239).

A bachelor's degree in the United States takes four to five years to complete. The first year of studies is made up of general education courses, which allow students to explore many subjects before deciding on their major. Most colleges in the U.S. apply the holistic method when admitting students which means that institutions consider the student's grade point average and admission test scores as well as factors such as recommendations, community service and extracurricular activities. (College Board 2011) In addition, each institution may have some personal touches to their admittance approach.

A unique feature of American higher education is the Greek societies on campus; fraternities for males and sororities for females. Such societies are social clubs that have a distinctive recruiting process. During a week-long *rush*, students who are interested are invited to participate in various activities. Those deemed worthy are then tried in various ways to determine their compatibility with the ideals of the society in question. After all the trials, including initiation, the chosen students become part of a tight-knit, exclusive group that they will most likely be involved with for the rest of their lives. (MacQueen 2009, 236)

2.2 Scottish culture

Scotland is a small country of a little over five million people and great diversity, despite its relatively small size. According to the British Council (2005), Scotland is “one of the last areas of unspoiled natural beauty in Europe, featuring mountains, lochs (lakes) and glens (valleys).” Although some of the traditional ways of life, such as sheep farming and the fish industry, still hold their place in the Scottish economy, more modern income providers, such as tourism, as well as the service and business sectors have also grown in importance. Scotland is a popular place to live and it continuously rates high on assessments regarding quality of life due to its social, cultural and leisure opportunities. (Wilson and Murphy 2008, 39),

2.2.1 Religion

Christianity is the dominating as well as the oldest religion in Scotland. A fact that is important to note regarding the Church of Scotland, is that it is completely separate from the state. (New Media Holdings, Inc. 2012.) Although religion is no longer a highly visible aspect of Scottish culture, the history of religion in Scotland can be perceived in the many old churches and cathedrals found in the country (Undiscovered Scotland 2000-2012). According to the Scottish Church Attendance Census of 2002, cited by the Scottish Catholic Media Office (2003), just as in many European countries, church attendance in Scotland is on the decline; only 11.2% of the population of Scotland on average attends church on Sundays.

2.2.2 Food culture

Depending on where the exchange student is arriving from, food customs in Scotland may cause some degree of culture shock upon arrival. Although, as in many developed countries, almost every kind of ethnicity is represented in both the choice of restaurants as well as the assortment of products available at grocery stores, genuine Scottish dietary customs are quite unique. As noted by Wilson and Murphy (2008, 39), the people of Scotland have quite unhealthy eating habits as well as tendencies toward heavy drinking. This statement is further supported by evidence gathered by Blades (2004) as well

as Marshall et al. (1994) both of which include research regarding the contents of Scottish diets. Both reports have come to the conclusion that Scottish diets consist of dangerously high intakes of fat and inadequate amounts of fruit and vegetables. In addition, Blades (2004, 247) includes the consumption of cakes and pastries as well as processed meats within the issues of main concern regarding Scottish diets.

As mentioned by Wilson and Murphy (2008, 39), the over usage of alcohol is an area of concern as the number of alcohol-related deaths in Scotland is twice the UK average. Exchange students from certain countries may be overwhelmed by the inexpensive alcoholic beverages available in stores as well as restaurants and bars which may lead to overconsumption and binge drinking. According to Ritchie et al. (2009, 170), students are the most studied group regarding heavy drinking and binge drinking and within most age groups students are the heaviest users of alcohol. In addition, a culture of “social preloading” is prevalent in the United Kingdom, which includes consuming often large amounts of store-bought alcohol before heading out to the bars (Ritchie et al. 2009, 175). Exchange students coming to Scotland from backgrounds of moderate or light alcohol usage should be mindful of the different customs as overdrinking in an unfamiliar environment can have disastrous results.

2.2.3 Studying at university

Scotland is a popular destination for many exchange students for a variety of reasons. Scottish university programs are highly flexible, allowing for cross-faculty study, which makes for well-rounded graduates. In addition, universities in Scotland have a strong focus on research as well as the employability of their graduates. Many universities have well-established procedures regarding exchange students as well as high-quality “English as a Second Language” –programs. (British Council 2012.)

Scotland has a strong history in education. In fact, many of the educational systems of the world, including that of the United States, are modeled after the Scottish system of higher education. An Undergraduate Honours degree in Scotland usually takes four years to complete. Students aren’t required to choose a major until their third year,

which allows them to spend the first year choosing subjects quite freely. (University of Aberdeen 2012.)

Higher education in Scotland is focused on independent effort, which can be seen in the structure of university courses. In-class contact may be much lower than in other educational systems, encouraging students to discover things on their own rather than receive information presented in a classroom. Traditional classroom lecturing is supported by tutorials in smaller groups as well as individual appointments with the lecturer. (University of Aberdeen 2012.)

Regarding accommodation, universities in Scotland offer many options. Students may choose from self-catering flats and traditional halls, where students are provided with meals as well as housing; halls located on campus grounds or elsewhere in the city; or privately rented apartments (Williams 2000). When making the choice of housing, students may consider aspects such as safety, independence, access by public transit and distance from the university. A more reasonably priced housing option may result in a more expensive bus ticket and a forty-minute commute to campus. Different options regarding the number of roommates are also available.

2.3 Comparing cultures in Finland, the United States and Scotland

As the above sections have focused on aspects of religion, food culture and educational systems in Scotland and the United States, this section will compare those systems with the same features of Finnish culture. In his book, "Finland, Cultural Lone Wolf", Richard Lewis (2004, 57-58), points out that Finnish people believe in scientific truth and hard work; they love their country but do not often say nice things about it; and while they basically are quite social, they also adore their privacy and isolation.

2.3.1 Religion

Perhaps the deepest difference in the cultures of Finland, Scotland and the United States is that of religion. Foremost, the role of religion in Finnish society is dramatically different than that of the United States. In the United States in the year 2010, 43.1% of

the population reported going to church weekly or almost weekly (Newport 2010). As a stark contrast, in Finland in 2010, only 1.8% of members of the Lutheran church attended church weekly (Yle Uutiset 2010). The same article states that religion in Finland is an extremely private affair, whereas the church in the United States has a highly social function in society. Finland and Scotland are quite similar in their churchgoing tendencies, although Scotland's 11.8% of weekly churchgoers is significantly higher than Finland's percentage. Both Finnish and Scottish churches have social functions as well, but they are not as highly visible as those in the U.S. For example, at Oklahoma State University, many activities arranged for exchange students were organized by church or bible-study groups whereas in Finland and Scotland, religious affairs were not visible at the institution of study.

2.3.2 Food culture

In general, food culture in Finland can be described as healthy, wholesome and fresh. Most Finns still cook a large portion of their meals at home using fresh ingredients, although convenience foods, restaurant meals and fast food consumption have been on the rise for some time. According to *Nutrition in Finland* (Pietinen et al. 2006, 14): "The Finnish diet has changed significantly during the past decades from being high in saturated fat and low in vegetables to a modern European diet that is close to recommendations in many ways." In this way, it can be said, that Finland is a little ahead of both Scotland and the United States in terms of healthy eating habits.

Convenience foods such as frozen vegetables and microwave foods, as well as eating outside the home are popular during the week, when schedules are hectic with work, studies and hobbies, but during weekends and holidays cooking together with more time and effort is common. Eating outside the home is focused on workplace and school cafeterias, since Finnish students in Higher Education institutes receive subsidized meals at school cafeterias and most workplaces offer lunch services as well. What is interesting to note, is that most school- and workplace cafeterias mainly serve warm meal options that follow the national nutritional recommendations. (Pietinen et al. 2006, 18-21.) This is strikingly different to lunch cafeterias in both U.S. and Scotland, which are

more likely to serve fast-food or sandwich items. In fact, the author of this thesis found it quite challenging to make good nutritional choices in both countries especially in the case of school cafeterias.

2.3.3 University customs

Higher education in Finland is clearly divided into academic universities focusing on research as well as scientific and artistic learning; and the more practical Universities of Applied Sciences which focus on professional higher education and research and development which is focused on practical issues in the field. A bachelor's degree received from a University of Applied Sciences usually takes 3.5 or 4 years to achieve and requires the student to complete an undergraduate thesis at the end of his or her studies. (Centre for International Mobility 2010.)

The most common type of accommodation in Finland is arranged by student housing foundations which are separate from the Universities themselves. Flats are usually spread out through different areas of the city of study, similar to the system in Scotland and quite different to the more campus-based housing typical to American Universities. The most common type of housing is a so-called cell apartment, which is shared by two or three students who each have their own room but share kitchen and washing facilities. Another common style of housing more closely resembles the dormitory, where the number of residents is much higher and while everyone has a private, lockable room and washing facilities, a kitchen/living area is shared by the residents of the entire floor. (Suomen opiskelija-asunnot SOA ry 2012.)

While Finnish higher education institutions have no organizations that can be compared with the Greek Societies of universities in the United States, each institution does have its own Student Union as well as various social clubs, mostly centered around hobbies or other specific interests (Centre for International Mobility 2010b).

3 CASE - H.O.T.E.L. ATLANTIS PROGRAM

During the spring term of 2009, the first group of students at Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS) filled out applications for the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis program. TUAS chose four students to take part in the program, all from very different backgrounds with varying experience in the field. After being chosen for the program, the students began preparing the required paperwork, which was quite extensive in itself as it included some preparatory assignments, flight and insurance arrangements as well as filling out the required forms for the universities.

The first cohort started their first semesters abroad at the start of the year 2010. The Finnish students attended Robert Gordon University (RGU) for the spring term, after which they returned home for the summer. The next phase included a full academic year at Oklahoma State University (OSU) as well as an internship at the organization of their choice. The structure of the program will be explained in more detail in section three.

The *H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis Program* can be divided into four parts as shown by the figure below. After completing the first three semesters at their home institution, the second part of the program included a semester of exchange to the institution from which a degree would not be obtained. The third part had the students attend the institution from which they would receive their second degree, for a full academic year. The final part of the project was to participate in an internship in the country of the second exchange.

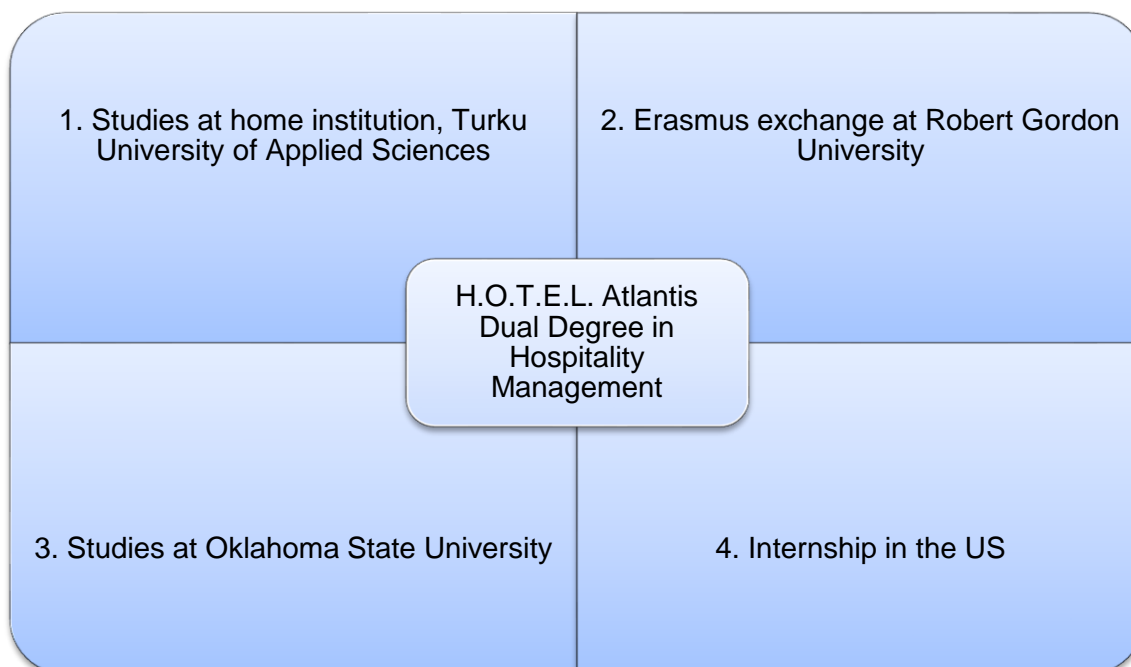


Figure 1 - Structure of the program

3.1 Studies in Scotland

For the first part of mobility, the Finnish students were to take part in a one-semester exchange to the Robert Gordon University (RGU) in Aberdeen, Scotland. As the E.U. administered grant did not provide for this exchange, it was carried out as an ERASMUS exchange. During their time at RGU, the Finnish students attended classes with second-year students in the International Hospitality Management program. The four modules completed during the spring semester included Food and Beverage Management, Accommodation Management, E-Retail as well as Consumer Behavior. In addition, the International Study Office organized some excursions to broaden the student's cultural experience during their stay.

3.2 Studies at Oklahoma State University

During the second stage of the project, the Finnish students took part in Hotel and Restaurant Administration (HRAD) studies at Oklahoma State University. In addition to the courses directly related to Hotel and Restaurant Administration, the Finnish students

attended General Education courses for part of the first semester as well as the entire second semester. The table below shows the courses taken by the Finnish students at Oklahoma State University.

Table 1 - Courses taken at OSU

HRAD courses	General Education courses
Hospitality Speaker Series	HES Transfer Experience
Hospitality Management and Organizations	Elementary Statistics for Social Sciences
Purchasing for Hospitality Organizations	Composition I
Service Management in Hospitality Organizations	International Freshman Composition II
	Geology and Human Affairs
	Lifespan Human Development
	Principals of Human Nutrition

As stated in the progress report (2011, 18), the Finnish students were originally meant to complete the General Education requirements by “testing out”. The students were to study the material on their own after which they would take the examination and receive credit for the course. Furthermore, the Finnish students would be mentored by OSU students who had already completed their General Education requirements and who would receive appropriate training to be able to be of assistance. However, it was decided by the program administrators in 2010, that this procedure would have placed an unreasonable workload on the students, as they would have been enrolled in the HRAD courses simultaneously. (EU/US Atlantis Programme 2011, 18) As a result, the Finnish students of the first cohort completed as many of the general education courses at OSU as time allowed for and were enrolled in correspondence courses to complete the rest. The courses that were left for the students to complete independently are found in the table below.

Table 2 - Correspondence courses

Correspondence courses
Introduction to English Literature
Western History to 1500
Math Functions and Uses
Introduction to Cultural Geography
American Government
Survey of American History

The funding for the correspondence courses was arranged by the students' home institution. Once enrolled, the Finnish students were to have a full year to complete the required courses, all of which included various writing assignments and exams to be completed under supervision at Turku University of Applied Sciences and sent by mail to be evaluated by the course instructor at Oklahoma State University. Because of the challenging circumstances of time and distance, the Correspondence Education office agreed to special arrangements which included allowing the students to email their writing assignments as well as using email to receive and return exams.

3.3 The internship

The final part of the dual-degree program for the Finnish students was to complete an internship in the United States. Oklahoma State University arranged an interview with The Broadmoor –resort from which all four students received offers. Three of the Finnish students accepted positions at the Broadmoor; two as hostesses at the restaurants on the property, and one as a Human Resources intern. The fourth Finnish student secured an internship at the Oklahoma City Golf and Country Club as a Food and Beverage Operations trainee. The internship consisted of 480 hours of practical training as well as progress reports written by the students and collected by the internship coordinator at OSU.

4 FINDINGS AND REFLECTION

In this section, the findings from the interviews will be discussed along with overall reflection on the experiences of the students. The findings have been grouped under students' goals and program goals and the students' views on both are presented. Although in the case of this thesis, it is not possible to ensure complete anonymity, the replies will nevertheless be presented collectively, in order to ensure honest and detailed personal opinions and accounts of experiences from the participants. A copy of the interview questions is presented as Appendix 1.

4.1 Students' goals

When asked to list their goals when starting out in the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis double degree program, the interviewed students included such things as developing language skills, broadening their professional knowledge, gaining new experiences, building a network of professionals as well as exploring all career possibilities in the international service sector. Generally, the students felt that goals regarding new experiences, networking and getting acquainted with the hospitality industry in the United States were easily achieved. Moreover, it appears that these goals were greatly tied with the students' own initiative and motivation; more might have been achieved if the students' had been more active in utilizing all opportunities. However, actual professional development regarding knowledge of the profession itself was not accomplished as completely. Moreover, while some basics of the industry such as service techniques were covered, the management perspective was not and some of the basics were tied to their environment and not so transferrable to Finland or other countries. This especially worried one of the students, as the management perspective is a key element of the TUAS Hospitality Management degree and especially the second internship; when the degree itself lacks this component, seeking management-level positions requires much more personally gained experience.

The second question asked the students to discuss how the program has enhanced their degree. Both students felt that participating in a program of this magnitude was in

itself a major increase in level of experience. Almost all aspects of the program brought new experiences and dealing with those experiences strengthened the students' confidence in themselves as well as their language skills, as most things had to be taken care of in English. The process of studying in three different universities also naturally has brought an immense load of information as well as different perspectives on things that most likely would not have been achieved had these students stayed in Turku for the duration of their studies. An additional benefit was a sense of representing Finland, still a relatively unknown country and people, in both Scotland and the United States.

Some of the unforeseen benefits of the program included a realization of the students' abilities in coping in an alien environment. Neither of the students interviewed had previous experience of living abroad, so all of the practical aspects of the program, such as living- and transportation arrangements in a foreign country, were unfamiliar. Additionally, a positive development in basic study skills, such as essay writing, was noticeable. In addition, the extent of development in language skills and confidence in speaking English was seen as an unforeseen benefit. One of the students mentioned first realizing the actual level of her language skills, which she had thought to be higher, initially causing a downward plunge in levels of confidence, but later a sense of accomplishment. In addition, although completing the general education –courses was an unforeseen challenge and perhaps an unfair burden, one of the students perceived an increase in general knowledge. The final emphasis on the increase in confidence was perceived during the internship at the Broadmoor resort as some apprehension regarding adaption into an American work environment was present beforehand.

Another unforeseen benefit for one of the students was an increased sense of appreciation toward working conditions in Finland. This included an employee's rights, even in small things such as breaks, organizational rules and rigidity, as well as wages, and vacations. Overall, after seeing various systems and working conditions during the program, this student feels gratitude toward living and working in a welfare-state such as Finland.

The fourth question asked the students to reflect on their own personal goals and comment on the most successful aspect of the program. Both participants seemed to agree

on a general sense of accomplishment, now that it is all coming to an end, as well as improved skills in coping with unfamiliar situations and seemingly enormous burdens.

The fifth question asked the students to share what they were disappointed with during the program. In general, the disappointments involved the instability of the program and lack of communication. Both students were aware, upon beginning the program, that the first cohort would be a test group, and some details would need to be adjusted throughout their studies. However, the amount of changes, which among other things brought the addition of six general education courses to be completed as correspondence courses as well as the prolonging of graduation, sometimes felt overwhelming.

Another issue of disappointment was the level of professional development, which was expected to be much higher by one of the participants. Moreover, the internship did not meet expectations in this aspect. Although the setting was magnificent and she learned much about service culture in a five star environment, the management perspective, which is supposed to part of third-year studies at TUAS as well as the second internship, did not seem to be fulfilled.

Both students found the sixth question, which asked them how the double degree has benefitted them, difficult to answer. Neither had, as of the time of the interview, perceived any benefits when seeking jobs. One of the student's commented that managerial positions in Finland appear to focus on field experience rather than academic achievements, so at this point only operational-level positions are open for her. However, both are hopeful that their efforts will benefit them in the future. In the end, the most concrete benefits of the program regard personal growth.

4.2 Program goals

The students were presented with a summary of the program goals as defined in this thesis, these are shown below.

1. The program was aimed to provide all applicants with fluent skills in English as well as a "basic knowledge of Spanish and Finnish".

2. The students were to be provided with a thorough understanding of the influence of culture on management, business and strategy.
3. To promote mobility and transparency between Universities in Europe and the United States.

As mentioned earlier in this section, both students felt an enormous improvement in their language skills regarding English. Moreover, their proficiency in both spoken and written English improved. In addition, both reported being more confident in using their English and one of the students mentioned learning language skills that may only be acquired by studying with native speakers, such as colloquialisms and conversational etiquette. Both students were disappointed by not being able to study other languages in addition to English. Especially regarding career possibilities in the United States, a basic knowledge of Spanish would be highly beneficial. In addition, a European language such as German would have been a positive merit for those considering a career within the European Union.

Regarding the second goal of gaining a full understanding of the effects of culture on the hospitality profession, most of the learning was based on personal experiences and observations by the students themselves. Some additional benefit was provided by the Speaker Series course; however, most of the speakers were American managers, so information was centered on American culture in management and business. Some other courses, such as Hospitality Management and Organizations offered some bits of information regarding different cultures in Hospitality management, but mostly it was up to the participants themselves to draw their own conclusions.

The final part of the question asked the students to discuss whether they felt that the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis program had indeed enhanced their employability overseas or within Europe. One student felt that visa requirements and general arrangements regarding storing one's possessions and finding an apartment in the destination were still too overwhelming to consider a career in the United States. However, both students felt that all of the experiences during the program regarding survival in stressful and unfamiliar conditions have made them more confident that they could successfully build a career in an English-speaking country in Europe.

With regards to how the program could have further increased their employability, one of the students mentioned that practical experience in the United States centered on the restaurant industry. Therefore, a more diverse understanding of also the hotel-side of the industry would have been beneficial. Another point was that many of the issues regarding employability revolve around the student's own level of interest and motivation. The program provided plenty of opportunities, but perhaps sometimes there was so much going on, that some of these opportunities were passed by.

Regarding suggestions for improving the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis program or developing similar programs, both students commented on the importance of fully communicating program-related goals and procedures before sending students overseas. One of the greatest sources of frustration for the two interviewed students was the lack of information concerning program and course details, which led to misinterpreting small bits of information that were occasionally dropped. In addition, the students would have appreciated being able to, at least in part, affect the choice of courses they took at these new universities. Oklahoma State University did, however, provide many opportunities for pursuing more personal interests through different clubs and organizations. All in all, the greatest suggestion for improvement was to have a more finished program before the first cohort as well as making sure the experience at least equaled the level of professionalism that would have been achieved at the home institution.

4.3 Reflection

Overall, the interviewed students appeared satisfied with their experiences during the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis double degree program. Although quite a few disappointments were present and a general sense of uncertainty accompanied the students throughout their time abroad, both felt that they are stronger as a result and can manage in almost any kind of situation. Additionally, both students felt that overall, they have a better, more diverse and richer degree than if they had stayed at TUAS and only completed the regular hospitality degree.

Although the author was a participant in the program, through the completion of the interviews, some new information and perspective was achieved. Moreover, a sense of

closure was reached by reviewing the original goals of both the program as well as the other participants; and summarizing everything that happened during execution. As expected, the interviews presented some points which the author would not have thought of, such as the part that the general education courses played in personal growth achieved during the program.

5 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to provide a general overview of the structure of the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis double degree program as well as the challenges faced by the first cohort of students participating from Turku University of Applied Sciences. Interviews were conducted in order to assess the success of the program during its pilot year. The main challenges during the thesis process were to remain relatively objective while writing about a theme which includes personal experience, as well as finding suitable times to interview colleagues who were busy with their own theses and jobs. The semi-structured interview, although a time-consuming method, provided the intended scope of information regarding participants' experiences. Unfortunately, one of the participants was never reached for interviewing, which was disappointing, as an additional point of view would have brought more credibility, reliability and depth to the study.

By comparing the original goals of the program with execution, it is evident that many problems arose, all of which could not be solved in a way favorable to the students. The language studies appeared to be one of the most disappointing changes as well as the level of professional development reached through studies and the internship. Positive to note, however, is that the interviewed students appreciated the program as a whole and were very aware of the personal growth achieved during their studies.

An interesting follow-up study would include the students from the second and third cohorts, comparing their experiences with the experiences of the first cohort. Because the structure of the program changed significantly after the first cohort, the feedback from the second group of students would also have given this thesis an interesting perspective, but due to time-constraints, this component was left out.

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Interview questions

1. List 3-5 personal goals that you hoped to achieve by taking part in the H.O.T.E.L. Atlantis program. Which of these goals did you achieve while participating in the program?
2. How do you feel that the program has enhanced your degree?
3. What kind of unforeseen benefits do you feel you gained during the program?
4. Reflecting on your personal goals, what do you feel was the most successful part of the program?
5. What were you disappointed with?
6. How do you feel that accomplishing a dual degree has benefitted or will benefit you?
7. The main goals set forth by the partnering institutions were the following:
 1. The program was aimed to provide all applicants with fluent skills in English as well as a “basic knowledge of Spanish and Finnish”.
 2. The students were to be provided with a thorough understanding of the influence of culture on management, business and strategy.
 3. To promote mobility and transparency between Universities in Europe and the United States.
 - i. How do you feel that your language skills improved during the program?
 - ii. How did the program make you more aware of the influence of culture on management, business and strategy?
 - iii. What part(s) of the program do you think promoted the possibility of working/studying in any part of Europe or the United States?
 - iv. What else do you feel you should have experienced or learned to improve your readiness to work/study somewhere else than Finland?
8. What suggestions do you have, based on your experience, to improve this or other similar programs?